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Diversity coalition being reactivated in wake of hate incidents

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After six years of inactivity, a Springfield group dedicating to speaking out against bigotry has reconvened in response to a cluster of incidents in 2009, including the hanging of nooses at city and state government workplaces.

"There was something different about last year, where people acted out acts of hatred quantitatively in a different way than had been occurring for quite a while within the city," said Larry Golden, an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Golden is a member of the Coalition to Promote Human Dignity and Diversity, which formed in 1993 after gay-bashing incidents in Springfield and local recruiting efforts by the Ku Klux Klan and White Aryan Resistance.

The coalition last week held its first meeting in years on Benedictine University's Springfield campus. The group hopes to plan programs for the coming months focusing on "hate activity" in the city, Golden said.

"We're searching for ways of providing a public voice that speaks very clearly that the kinds of activities we've seen in the past year are unacceptable," he said.

Golden, 65, previously sat on the coalition as a representative of the Springfield Jewish Community Relations Council and the Springfield chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Members of the coalition have kept in touch in recent years and were searching for a way to respond to an unusual spurt in incidents, he said. The situations included the July 26 discovery of a noose hanging in a work area used by a black employee of City Water, Light and Power.

The employee, Mike Williams, has said he believed the noose was hung as an act of intimidation against him. Kevin Conway and Greg Selinger, both white CWLP employees, were accused of making and hanging the noose.

On Aug. 6, Bradley Barber, a white CWLP storeroom clerk, allegedly hung a noose from the cage of a forklift he was driving at CWLP's Groth Street plant.

Conway, Selinger and Barber all denied any racial intent in their alleged actions, according to police. None of the men was charged with a crime, although all three were given 60-day suspensions from their jobs.

In addition to the CWLP cases, other "hate incidents" cited by Golden included:

*The discovery of racist graffiti July 24 at the Springfield office of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus near the Statehouse. That crime hasn't been solved.

*An Oct. 3 altercation in a UIS campus parking lot that resulted in the filing of hate-crime charges against three UIS students in connection with comments about sexual orientation that allegedly were aimed at two other men. The hate-crime charges were dropped, but other felony and misdemeanor charges remain pending against two of the men.

*Discipline of a white employee of the Illinois Department of Corrections in early October for leaving a noose in his work area at the department's administrative offices on Concordia Court.

Archie Lawrence, president of Springfield's NAACP chapter, said he believes frustration felt by some people about the election of President Barack Obama might have contributed to the spurt in incidents.

Reactivation of the coalition "can't do anything but help," Lawrence said.

Golden said he believes the three city workers should have been fired.

"The response by the people who are in formal positions of leadership within the community has been insufficient, and as a result of that, may actually in a certain way lend permission for people to act out in these ways," he said.

City Water, Light and Power spokeswoman Amber Sabin declined to respond to Golden's statement.

Regarding the coalition, however, she said, "We value the ongoing discussion and understanding about diversity in our community. ... We have implemented our own mandatory training for all city employees on this subject with attention to racial, gender and age bias."

Golden said the coalition probably will be made up of members of "faith organizations," colleges, the gay community and interested individuals. The coalition's activities will be designed to create a climate that discourages hate-related activity, he said.

"It's not so much to change people's minds who are deeply prejudiced — that would be very difficult to do," he said. "Very often, people will be reluctant to act out things that are problematic, that really pose, in a sense, almost intimidation to other people, if they have to do so within an environment where they know it's going to be unacceptable all the way around."

Coalition member Diane Lopez Hughes, 60, a retired social worker who is a leader of a local peace organization called Pax Christi, said: "Witness and presence is very valuable, and in a way, it's teaching. You never know who you're going to touch."

Dean Olsen can be reached at 788-1543.

Questions

People with questions about Springfield's Coalition to Promote Human Dignity and Diversity can contact coalition member Larry Golden at lgold1@uis.edu.

Corrections worker fired

An Illinois Department of Corrections employee found to have placed a noose in his personal work area in October was fired Wednesday in connection with that conduct, a state spokeswoman said.

The employee — a white man — was placed on paid leave after the noose was found Oct. 6 by another employee, spokeswoman Januari Smith said.

The man, whom Smith declined to name, didn't return to work during the department's investigation, she said.

The man admitted that he hung the noose next to his coat on a coat rack in his work area at the department's administrative offices on Concordia Court in Springfield, Smith said.

The employee, who was placed on unpaid leave Jan. 2, was terminated for violating the department's code of conduct, Smith said.

She said she didn't know whether the man told department investigators why he hung the noose. Smith also said she didn't know the race of the employee who found the noose.

— *Dean Olsen*



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